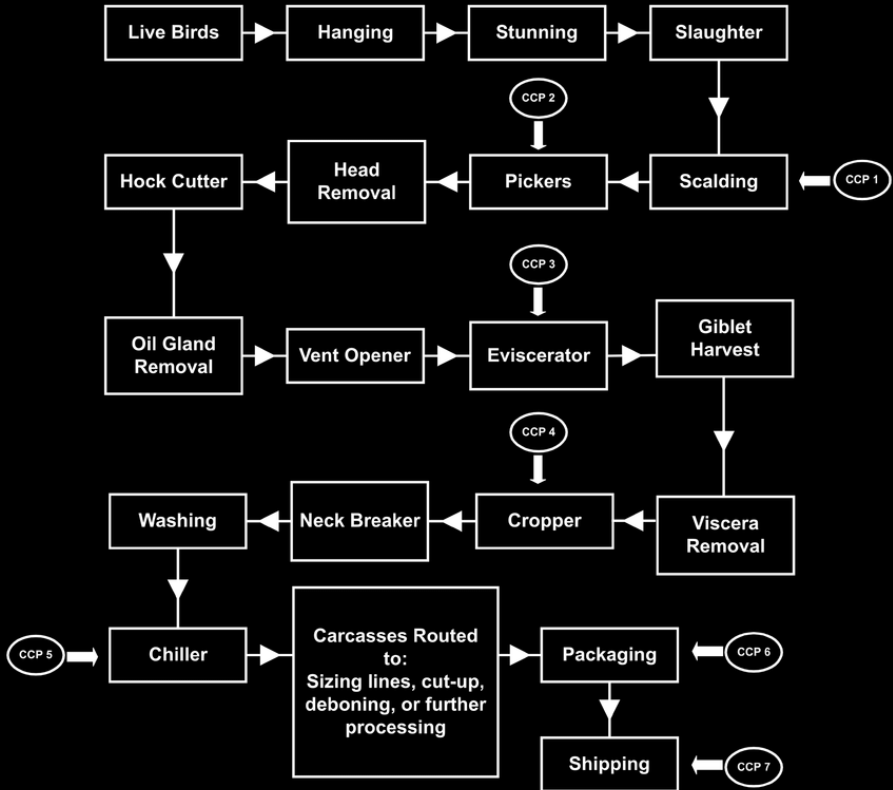


PULVERIZATION



MAGGIE SIEBERT



PULVERIZATION

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ION

Five figures sit in a semi-circle, their hands bound with thick rope, resting in their laps. Their heads are covered with black hoods. They are otherwise naked. A single, harsh overhead light illuminates the stage. Everyone speaks at once.

XXXXXXX: So, I guess it was around 12:30 in the morning when we went down to the Depot, the one on Washington Ave., and I said, you know, hey, why don't you get us some drinks, I'm gonna go out back and have a smoke real quick. So she says okay, and I just needed to step outside and catch my breath and think for a second. I could feel myself kind of, I don't know, giving into it I guess. All I could think about was getting a plastic bag over her head. That was always how I wanted to do it, you know, I liked the idea of seeing her... I guess him, whoever, kinda suck in and not have anything to breathe out.

XXXXXXX: And you did it?

XXXXXXX: Yeah. She came outside looking for me and I said we should go back to my place and she said okay. We took the drunk bus, the stop is a few blocks from the apartment. When we got in she sat down and asked for a drink and I knew it was my chance. So I went to the kitchen and stuck a grocery sack in my back pocket and, well. You know what happened next.

XXXXXXX: How long did it take for her to stop breathing?

XXXXXXX: I honestly have no idea. Time just became sort of irrelevant. I was just in it. Nothing else was on my mind. I just know eventually I felt her kind of give up. She slumped. I felt

her die.

XXXXXXX: Do you regret it?

XXXXXXX: No.

XXXXXXX: Why not?

XXXXXXX: It was too profound. For both of us. I think if there was a way for me to get in contact with her now, she'd thank me. I really do.

XXXXXXX: When I was 14 I remember my grandmother was basically comatose. Catatonic, whatever the word is. And she had this stay-at-home nurse. But he was gone for a few hours, and I was just there helping out. Turning her over so she didn't get bed sores. And I went over to fluff one of her pillows, and while I was holding it, it occurred to me that I could just put it over her face. I wouldn't even have had to hold down for very long, or very hard. She was so frail. And I honestly thought about doing it. Not because she looked miserable, not because it was the humane thing to do, but just because I wanted to. And right when I was about to do it she opened her eyes. I think she knew. She died a few days later.

XXXXXXX: Eric and Dylan made Doom levels that looked like their high school. What if they had gone on to be game devs?

XXXXXXX: Have you talked to her family at all?

XXXXXXX: They came to visit once. I wasn't expecting them,

and I wasn't sure what they'd say. It was just the mom and dad. The mom was the one with the phone, and the dad just stood next to her. He wouldn't look at me, but she did.

XXXXXXX: What did she say?

XXXXXXX: Nothing.

XXXXXXX: We just looked at each other. I don't think she had anything she needed to say.

XXXXXXX: Why did she come?

XXXXXXX: I think she just wanted to see me.

XXXXXXX: Did you know the girl was only 17?

XXXXXXX: No.

XXXXXXX: Would you have done it if you did know?

XXXXXXX: I don't think it would have made a difference.

XXXXXXX: His uncle took over a TV news station once. He wanted to be broadcast, he had a message or something. But he had this stutter, and when they started filming he couldn't get it out. He could only say like half a sentence, he would get stuck on a word and just say it over and over again before moving onto the next thought. He got so frustrated he cut off the interview about halfway through. Nobody got killed or

anything. Except him I guess.

XXXXXXX: I saw that live.

XXXXXXX: That's the thing, they never aired it. It wasn't live. They just aired commercials while the police were outside, waiting to bust the door down.

XXXXXXX: He had already killed himself by the time they got in.

XXXXXXX: Do you remember how it happened, exactly?

XXXXXXX: She was working at this factory hospital, just birthing babies one by one, so quickly. The mothers were completely unconscious, and she would just pull them out in one go, clean them off and they'd move down the line. All day long, eight hour shifts. At night she'd go home, and all she could think about were babies. She finally decided she'd had enough, and she threw one through a window. Then all the women on the line started doing it too. Infants flying through the air, soundless. The foreman couldn't stop them, they had to shut down the whole plant.

XXXXXXX: I've been stuck here for, I don't even know how long.

XXXXXXX: When did she start sending you letters?

XXXXXXX: I guess probably two years ago. The first one she kind of talked through her feelings, she, what's the word,

excoriated me for me for doing what I did. For killing her daughter, I guess. There were some details I picked up on that seemed strange for her to tell me. Like, she casually mentioned she and her husband were having problems since it happened.

XXXXXXX: Do you talk about that now?

XXXXXXX: Yeah, it's funny, she says she didn't intend it that way.

XXXXXXX: Years later my best friend was dying, he had multiple sclerosis. When he started going downhill, it was so fast. It was like, I remember him having aches and sort of walking funny, and before I know it he can't get out of bed, he's having trouble breathing. One day I was visiting him and he told me he didn't know if he could take much more of it. So much pain. And he asked me if I would do him a favor, a really important one. I said sure. He asked me if I'd kill him. He wanted it to be over but he didn't think he could do it himself. I don't know if he meant physically or emotionally. I never asked. But I said shit, that's a lot to ask of someone. He told me to think about it. So, I did. A few visits passed, he didn't mention it. But one night I went over there and he asked about it again. And, you know, I had, and I said I would. He asked if I'd do it right now. Nobody was with him, I was one of the few people who came by. He said, please. I thought really hard about it, and finally I decided that yeah, I would. I told him I was gonna smother him with a pillow, because that would look the least suspicious. No blood anyway. He said that would be fine. We watched a few episodes of something, I don't remember. Not

important. Then he said, okay, I'm ready. I just held it down as tight as I could. He barely even struggled. I wasn't sad at the time. I was very sad after. But when I was doing it, all I could think about was my grandma.

XXXXXXX: The town was completely deserted, save for this one guy. He walked around to every house. He looked in every window, knocked on all the doors. Went in every shop. Looked in all the cars parked in the street. Checked under desks. Opened up manholes, went in the sewers. Called all the businesses in the phone book. Spent months looking for someone, anyone. All the electricity worked, the Internet worked, everything. Friends in other states would respond to his calls. But everyone in his town was gone. He didn't tell anyone, and no one seemed to notice.

XXXXXXX: What time is it?

XXXXXXX: Hey, I've been looking for you. What are you doing outside? I got us drinks.

XXXXXXX: By the fourth or fifth letter, she had completely opened up. She opened one up by describing to me how conflicted she felt, she was having sex dreams about me. She described them in meticulous detail.

XXXXXXX: It wasn't just her though.

XXXXXXX: No, her husband had been sending them too.

XXXXXXX: Same thing?

XXXXXXX: He was more forthright about it from the getgo. They must have been talking about it for awhile. By this time I had been in prison for maybe a decade. They started asking if we could meet again.

XXXXXXX: Is it processing, do you think?

XXXXXXX: I'm not sure what it is for them.

XXXXXXX: I don't think we have much time left.

XXXXXXX: Are the three of you happy?

XXXXXXX: [pause] Yeah. I think we are.

CARN

IVOR

OUS

Her headlights pierced the blackness, illuminating swirling dust. Sitting, waiting, letting the engine idle, she wondered if she had been followed. Probably not; she was too far out of town, and her eyes spent more time on the rearview mirror than the road for the duration of the drive out here.

Then again, they had found the spot earlier that day, the two waxy corpses of her classmates which now lay stiff in the backseat under a heavy quilt.

“What the fuck are you doing?” one of them asked when they found her kneeling atop the plant with her pants down.

Soon after the two boys were running. She scrambled back into her jeans and fumbled for the car keys. Then she was driving, gas pedal scraping the mat-less floor of the '97 Civic. The boys tried to veer off in separate directions, but she was too quick, and an instant later both lay flattened beneath the chassis.

She kicked the one left alive, choking and sputtering, over and over until he went slack. Opening the backseat and pushing aside a picnic basket, (full of crackers, cheese, grapes, summer sausage and little toast points) she heaved the bodies in separately, covered them and, ignoring the offal that coated the desert floor, turned 180 degrees back toward the plant.

It sat there, breathing. Magnificent red petals, waxy, thick and veined; a mess of thorny vines clumped beneath its sepals. When she approached it the vines shot outward and tiny follicles stood erect.

Then its tongue unfurled.

She waited, unsure how to proceed.

Hours later, long after the sun had set, she sat listening to the only AM station that came through.

“Cleveland’s going to have a hell of a time recovering from last night,” a voice said, while another audibly nodded. The signal crackled and sometimes degraded into pure static, but she kept listening and kept staring out the windshield, headlights illuminating the plant.

Its tongue was still out, waiting.

She didn’t remember how she found it. Driving through the desert one night just to be away from that awful home, she blinked and suddenly found herself standing before its tendrils. She didn’t remember removing her clothing, but she did remember the orgasm, a g-force pummelling of sensation that vacated her bladder, the contents of which the plant lapped greedily.

She shut off the headlights, removed the key from the ignition and stepped out of the vehicle. The plant began to sing its song.

The car and all three bodies were gone by sunrise.

The plant lay in wait.

BOND ING

“Wake up.”

No light shone through the bedroom windows. When the police would come, later, the mid-morning sun would bore itself deep behind his eyes, heating the folds of his brain until they were sticky with dew. Now, a matte darkness shrouded him, but not so wholly that he couldn't see the wet silhouette of his father standing in the doorway.

He arose. He knew this day was coming, had known for years. He didn't know when, and neither did his father. But the knowledge sat with them constantly, a fourth family member at the dinner table. At baseball games, school plays, birthdays, heart-to-heart conversations, it was always present, the gnawing dread of knowing what needed to be done.

They moved through the house, careful not to wake his sleeping mother. She would not understand this, the necessity of it, what was at stake. The two of them weren't sure they did either, at least not fully. As they neared the sliding glass doors that led to the backyard, he wondered how she would feel in the next few hours, what thoughts would go through her head when she saw what he had done. He stuffed those thoughts down.

Now, outside, the door clicked into place, the motion-detecting light switched on, he saw his father's work: a wide circle, burned into the lawn. He looked deeply at his father, fully visible, and saw the same man he'd seen every day: the kind, doting American History teacher, always quick to understand and generous in offering comfort. His outward stoicism belied

kind eyes, and sadness over what they were about to do beneath them.

“Once this starts, we don’t stop for anything.”

The night before he started third grade his father had asked him to come into the living room. His mother was out picking up a take-and-bake pizza, and they sat alone on the couch, the warm glow of lamplight making him feel safe. His father told him they needed to talk, that he wasn’t in trouble, but that this wasn’t going to be a nice talk. He told him it was time to tell him the truth about what happened to grandpa.

“I need you to know that I love you.”

They stepped into the circle.

His father lunged forward, throwing him to the ground and pinning him with both knees on his arms. A torrent of pain as a fist sinks into his nose, his vision filling with exploding stars as blood and snot cascaded from his billowing nostrils. Another blow sends the resonating crunch of broken facial bones sounding into the night air. It hurts so much he can’t even scream. His father mercifully rolled off him.

“We have to do this. It hurts tremendously and you will carry it with you for the rest of your life, but it needs to be done,” his father had said on the couch.

He thought of how the pizza tasted after that conversation, after he learned that in just five years he too would have to kill

his own father. He thought about how he wept, how his mother teased him for years for crying over not wanting to go to school, and how his father, in his eternal kindness, simply placed his hand over his.

With one last look at the night sky he shot up from the ground and found his father's form. He charged him, sending a knee into his stomach before wrenching both thumbs deep into his eyes, the slick, oily feeling both disgusting and exhilarating him.

Father abruptly leaned into son's thumbs, sending them deep into his sockets. Caught off guard he pulled them loose and was quickly met by the deafening crack of his father's skull against his. Staggering around, senses in chaos, they flailed blindly before their hands met. Like dancers they fell into each other, then began to claw. They tore strips from each other's flesh, broke fingernails and left them embedded in limbs. In between they landed punches, kicks, slaps.

He let out a massive cry. Lights turned on in nearby houses but neither noticed. His father breathed raggedly, his movements drunken and erratic, his brain beginning to fail as he swiped aimlessly at his son. Weeping, he grasped his father's hair with his fist and dragged him to the fence. With all the might left in his body, he forced his face into the maroon planks of wood, then again, then again, until his father's body went limp.

Vomiting, falling to his knees, he moaned in agony as the last of the night sky melted into an effervescent orange. The deep red of the sun poured through the clouds, and before

collapsing to the ground he caught a glimpse of his mother watching silently from the window.

IT HINK I

'M GOIN

G TO BE

SICK

The feeling wasn't quite nausea, but the contents of her stomach ebbed and flowed all the same, sloshing around thick like hot compost.

It started around 9:00 a.m., right when she began her shift at the call center. She took the elevator to the twentieth floor of the cramped high rise that housed so many attorneys and accountants, poured the first of ten or eleven coffees and deposited herself onto the exercise ball she used in lieu of a chair.

Computer already switched on, she attempted to navigate to the company portal but was struck by the feeling, as if her insides were solidifying. She sat for a moment and looked straight forward, ignoring her coworkers who were by now five calls into the workday. Counting backward from 100, she shut her eyes and breathed deep, in and out, until the pain retreated to the back of her mind.

Feeling marginally better, she picked up the phone and selected a lead from the dialer. It rang three times before someone picked up.

"Hello?"

"Hi, this is Constance with --"

She went no further. She couldn't. The horrible stench emanating from her mouth made her eyes leak.

"Hello?"

She slammed the phone down on the receiver and walk-ran to the nearest restroom. Only one other person was inside, locked in a stall. She approached the mirror and stuck out her tongue.

It was normal.

She examined her uvula and tonsils, checking, hoping, for stones.

There was nothing.

She let out an exasperated scoff.

A phone clattered to the tile, cracking and sending microscopic glass shards into the grout. Two legs with stockings crumpled about the ankles shot into the air, shins connecting with the underside of a stall door. Then, a whole body smacked the ground head first, seizing for a full minute before stiffening.

The smell was unbearable.

Terrified, she ran from the bathroom with a hand over her mouth and charged back into the main office.

“Please, someone help me.”

If it was coffee breath, the hand might have done some good. But as soon as the word “help” left her mouth, the five people sitting at the desk to her right jolted up as if stunned by an electric current. Their eyeballs filled with blood, foam billowing

from their mouths before a final violent lurch sent them all to the floor.

“Please.”

More bodies fell. Coworkers across the room ran to help the others and walked right into the wall of stench, the electric odor smiting everyone in its path. She wept, praying for it to stop and sending more and more of the otherworldly bouquet into the air.

The whole office was dead within the hour.

Outside, a week later, the city devoid of life, the remains of military vehicles and police barricades littered across the streets, she wandered. She didn't know what else to do.

Then, the greatest pain of all, a lightning strike in the pit of her stomach that sent her to her knees. She let out a guttural moan that lasted for an eternity, eyes wide, mouth agape and aimed at the sky. It all came out in a torrent that rocketed heavenward and never came back down.

Once it was all over, she felt much better.

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LEA

K

Click.

A cesarean section. The surgeon and his team move with blinding efficiency. The initial incision, at the base of the stomach, splits the first several layers of skin. A second finds purchase, revealing the opaque uterus. Punctured, it bursts with a loud pop as the encased infant is exposed to the world.

Click.

Low quality cell-phone footage, circa 2008. Grainy video shows what looks like a motorcycle accident. A man in leather stumbles around the site of the accident, holding his face. He turns, and the camera sees for the first time that his jaw is separated from his skull. Thick ribbons of flesh hang lazily from his cheekbones. He's trying to say something.

Click.

Montage of shotgun suicides set to what sounds like Xasthur.

Click.

A drunken Ukrainian falls from a concrete building, landing directly on his head. His body ragdolls, crumpling in a heap.

Click.

A man desperately clings to the top of an electrical tower. A storm has lit his body on fire. He can't decide whether to die falling or burning.

Click.

“We’ve already seen all of these.”

Austin tears his eyes from the screen, and focuses them on Cavan.

“And?”

“And if you don’t have anything new to show me then I would like to do something else.”

But what else is there to do?

PULVE

RIZATI

ON

Late at night. Ten miles outside of town, a short drive made shorter by the absence of Highway Patrol. Turning onto the dirt road at the mile marker with the dog-eared corner. The sound of crunching gravel. Headlights off. Before long, the dark blur of a chain link fence bleeds into view, encasing the modest factory.

Rural area, doors tend to stay unlocked. So far off the beaten path. And who would break in?

Who would want to?

The door creaks. Inside, pitch black. No need for lights, he's been here enough times. Knows his way through instinct. Fourteen big steps from the door, straight forward, one half-step and he's in front of it.

A complex maze of machinery, hundreds of parts, multiple steps. When he first started coming here, he assumed the plant would be clean, but this isn't like in the videos. The smell is overwhelming, the putrid stench of offal and hardened fat burning his nostrils and still, after all this time, forcing him to stifle bile.

Standing, waiting. Running hands all along the edges, feeling the corners, pressing down with his palms until it hurts. The cold alloy warms at his touch. Soaking it in. He strips off his shirt, unbuttons his pants, scurries out of socks and underwear. Folds each item and places it in a pile, making note of where he left it.

He stands, admiring the dim outlines of components. Flip a few switches and this whole thing would roar to life. He knows where they all are, but he isn't ready.

Not yet.

Fumbles toward the ladder, next to the elevator shaft. Hand over hand, all the way to the top, the smell growing stronger and stronger until at last, he reaches the summit. This is the hard part: a drop, one which requires throwing both feet over the side of the elevator car and plunging directly into the container below. He savors the moment. Still a thrill, after all this time.

Then, he pushes off, hard. The second it takes to hit the bottom feels like a lifetime, but the impact is broken by the cold, wet pile at his feet. The smell almost knocks him out but he regains his composure. Examining his surroundings, now totally blinded by darkness, he feels the contents of the material buffer bin.

Hooves. What feels like a paw. Feathers. Unidentifiable carcasses, crudely shredded in halves and quarters. Limbs. Grease. Organs.

Sometimes he tries to imagine where each animal might have come from. Tonight, though, he's focused, sucking in lungfuls of the reeking carrion aroma.

No time to savor it.

On his knees now, scraping the edges, scooping up as much liquid as possible with both hands, sacramentally. Rubbing it into his arms, legs, hair. Avoiding the retracted blades. Reaching down into the pipe that carries the five centimeter chunks down to the pre-crusher. Feeling what he knows to be the grey remnants of untold amounts of meat. Praying to be rendered.

He lays in it, on his back, covering himself with fibrous slop like a blanket. Memories of being buried in sand on the beach, encased. He stays there for a long while, not thinking, barely breathing, until he starts to feel the meat come alive. Just like it always does.

What he wouldn't give for the switches to flip themselves.

BIRTH DAYPA RTY

The boy was splayed on his back, flies buzzing in and out of his head in lazy figure eights. He clutched a toy pistol in his left hand, fingers stiffened around the grip. There was no blood on the ground beneath him, but the exit pattern of a bullet illustrated itself on his right temple. He wore a cowboy's vest, child's Levi's with an elastic waistband and a t-shirt that said "Who's the man?"

Kyle and Jeremy stared at the body for a long time, processing the sight of it. They had been hunting a rabbit they caught sight of at the other end of the park. They chased it toward where the park met with the nearby woods. A huge storm drain sat down at the base of a creek that ran through the area, filled with weeds and garbage left behind by drunk high schoolers. The rabbit leapt down into the ravine, and both boys pursued it ravenously, BB guns cocked.

They lost sight of the rabbit in the brush, and found themselves dejected at the mouth of the drain when they noticed a shoe sticking out from the rush of water.

They pulled at the shoe and found it connected to a body. They repositioned him so that the rising sun would illuminate his face. Carefully, both climbed into the drain's opening and crouched next to him.

They marvelled at the boy's features, slightly bloated, his tongue swollen and partially protruding from his mouth. Aside from the blood, he was not particularly dirty — he had been placed there with some care.

After consideration, Kyle momentarily exited the drain. He collected two sticks and handed one to Jeremy, mumbling something about how they shouldn't touch him with their bare hands because they might get AIDS.

Neither of them noticed an odor.

"This is messed up," said Jeremy, and Kyle nodded, twisting his stick in his hands like he was cooking a marshmallow.

"What do we do with it?" asked Jeremy.

"Leave it, I guess," said Kyle.

Kyle reached for the boy's hand and pried his fingers away from the toy pistol. He examined it carefully, taking in all of its angles, absorbing its image. He shoved it into his jacket pocket and slugged Jeremy on the arm.

"Let's go," he said. "We'll come back tomorrow."

"Wait," Jeremy said. "They'll find him."

Kyle thought about that for a moment, then elbowed Jeremy, a request for help. The two lifted the boy's body by his feet and armpits and carried him toward a nearby bush. They parted the branches and reverently placed his body within, covering him with scattered leaves and twigs.

They scurried up the incline and looked down at the storm drain, trying to see if any part of the boy's body was visible

As far as they could tell, it wasn't.

"I have to go home now," Jeremy said.

"Me too," Kyle said.

It was late October, and it would be dark soon.

They walked home together, not saying much. When the houses were about to give way to apartment complexes, Jeremy silently said his goodbyes and turned left, heading toward his family's two story stucco.

Kyle continued onward for several more blocks, until the sky completely darkened. The stars were covered in a thick blanket of clouds, and when he finally reached his mother's apartment, Kyle sat outside for a moment longer. He listened as the downstairs neighbors argued, and wondered if his mom would be off early tonight. He wondered what was in the freezer that he could make for dinner.

///

Jeremy sat with his parents on the couch, watching television and eating dry roast beef off a TV tray. The milk he drank was on its last legs, and would be spoiled by the end of the week. He made a mental note to inform his mother of this.

He wanted to leave the living room and continue reading the fantasy novel he checked out from the school library, but his parents insisted that dinner time was family time. He hated

television, could not see the appeal of the show about all the people who hung out at the same bar that his parents loved so much.

The episode was about to end, the telltale swell of music before the credits signifying to Jeremy that he was soon to be free. He hurriedly scarfed down the rest of his dinner, ready to make his escape. He had done his best to keep thoughts of the boy at bay, attempting to recall as many plot details as possible from his book.

The show had ended and the news began to play. Jeremy asked if he could be excused. His father waved him out of the room.

As he was on his way out, an anchor's voice cut violently through the room.

"The search for a Lakeside boy has turned up no new evidence."

Jeremy paused.

"Five year-old Charles Davis was reported missing two days ago by his parents, Rhonda and Carl Davis, after he disappeared while playing in the front yard."

A picture of Charles flashed on the screen, and Jeremy nearly dropped his plate. He darted out of the room with no thought for maintaining his composure.

He sat on his bed for hours, contemplating the juxtaposition of the boy's face on television and the puffy, lifeless one he discovered in the storm drain. If Jeremy hadn't thought about the boy much since returning home, he was all he could think about now. He considered telephoning Kyle, but decided against it.

He sat in silence for hours, completely unaware of the time, turning the image of Charles Davis' face over and over in his mind until exhaustion took hold and he passed out, still in his school clothes. He dreamt of drowning in shallow water, his face held into a puddle by an unseen, impossibly strong hand.

///

Kyle sat on the kitchen counter, eating a bologna sandwich, staring intently at the linoleum. His eight year-old sister, Megan, walked in and asked what he was doing.

"Did you do your homework, Meg?" Kyle asked.

"I don't have homework today," Megan said.

"Did you take a bath yet?" Kyle asked.

"I don't take baths anymore," Megan said. "I take showers."

Her feet were stained black with dirt, and Kyle briefly wondered if she had been at the park that day too. He imagined her skipping through the park, coming across the storm drain, looking into its recesses and seeing, just barely enough to be

visible, the protrusion of a hand in firing position. He shook the thought from his mind.

“Go take a bath, Meg,” he said.

“Mom’s not home and I don’t know how to turn the water off,” she said.

“Yes you do,” Kyle said. “You just push the handle down.”

Megan groaned.

“Go take a bath.”

She stomped out of the room.

Kyle hastily ate the rest of his sandwich and retreated toward his room. The sound of running water bubbled from behind the bathroom door.

“Don’t just run the water, Meg, take a bath,” Kyle said.

He heard Megan groan, followed by a splash.

He stepped into his bedroom. The walls were lined with posters of athletes he didn’t know or care about, but whose images he displayed to cover the decaying paint, gifts from relatives who he hadn’t seen since he was six. The rest of his room was relatively bare. His BB gun leaned against a far corner, a plastic container of ammunition on the floor next to it.

Kyle opened up his backpack and pulled out his sixth grade math textbook. His eyes quickly glazed over at the parade of numbers and letters, and his thoughts eventually returned to the body.

He looked familiar, that was for certain. Their town was not particularly small, but compact enough that the same faces made regular appearances. He wondered where he had seen this kid before. He thought it could be someone's younger brother, but had no idea whose.

He felt a vague disquiet wash over him, an unease at his willingness to hide the body rather than tell the police, or an adult. He felt entranced, almost as if something outside himself compelled him to place the body so that he could visit it again. That urge superseded all of Kyle's anxiety, and when he finally shut his textbook at 11:30, none of his homework completed, he had resolved to return the following day.

///

It was exactly as they left it. Charles' skin had turned a slight shade of purple, and more color had drained from his face, but he was otherwise in the same shape as yesterday.

"I think his name is Charles," said Jeremy.

Kyle nodded.

"Where'd you hear that?" he asked.

“Was watching the news. His picture showed up,” said Jeremy.

“If they find us looking at him, do you think they’re gonna think we did it?” asked Jeremy.

“I don’t know,” said Kyle. “I don’t think so.”

“How do you know?” asked Jeremy.

Jeremy grabbed a branch and used it to turn the boy’s head to the side. He examined the bullet wound. It was cleaner than expected. In movies he had seen, getting shot in the head meant the whole thing exploded. This wasn’t like that.

“Why would somebody shoot him?” asked Jeremy.

“I have no idea,” said Kyle.

They gingerly pushed the body back behind the bush, covering it once again and darting up toward the park, this time with more urgency.

When they were several blocks from the park, Jeremy asked:

“Should we tell the police?”

Kyle stopped walking.

“You said yourself, they might think we did it.”

“Why did we move him?” asked Jeremy.

“I wanted to get a better look at him,” said Kyle.

Jeremy had wanted the same thing, but did not say so.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” said Kyle.

“See you,” said Jeremy.

///

Rhonda Davis sat in her bedroom with the lights off. She did not cry; she had found herself incapable of doing so today.

She thought about her son, Charles, and how his sixth birthday was coming up in a month. She wondered if he was going to feel up to having a birthday party when he got back. They might have to postpone. All of the people might scare him.

Her husband was out, at the grocery store, had been there for over three hours now. She assumed he was really at a bar, which was fine with her. Charles had not returned yet, so there wasn’t much of a reason for him to be home.

He had told her that she was delusional, that she needed to start to accept the reality of the situation. She wasn’t sure what he meant by that. The reality of the situation was that Charles was missing, and that he would eventually turn up and everything would go back to normal soon. They would have to take him to the doctor to make sure he was alright, and everyone would think they were terrible parents for letting their child run away, but at the end of the day he would return and

everything would go back to normal.

Since Charles left, Rhonda dreamt every night of her son running through the forest, pursuing some sort of wild animal. His favorite movie was Jungle Book, but the closest thing he had to that kind of costume was the cowboy vest and toy pistol his grandmother had purchased him for his fourth birthday. Still, he pretended to be Mowgli, picking berries and chasing the animals in his imagination.

In her dream, Charles captures the animal, (different every time, most recently a sparrow) and instead of killing it, holds it, petting it gently and subduing it. This was the boy she had raised, one who was loving and kind, one who did not want to hurt anyone or anything. Her husband was often put off by his nature, insisting that he toughen up, but Rhonda fought tooth and nail for her son to remain just the way he was. The world, Rhonda thought, was too cold, and needed a guiding light. She thought Charles could be that.

The first two days he had been missing, all she could assume was that he had died. She found herself incapable of imagining her son's body, having to identify him days later at the county morgue, or worse, never finding him. That thought almost scared her more.

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After school, Kyle and Jeremy returned to the woods and immediately felt something off. There was a commotion in the air, a palpable excitement. Trying to appear nonchalant, the

two walked in the direction of the storm drain.

As the ravine came in sight, Jeremy gasped.

A dozen boys and girls, all from their middle school, were crowded around the bush where they had last left Charles' body. His body had been pulled crudely from its covering, exposed to sight. His cowboy vest was now torn.

One of their classmates noticed them and shouted out:

"You're never gonna believe what we found."

The two walked trepidatiously toward the ravine, skidded down the incline and composed themselves as best they could.

"What is it?" asked Kyle.

Jeremy said nothing.

"It's a dead-ass body, that's what," said their classmate.

The group giggled.

"Isn't it cool?" said another.

The commotion ignited something in Jeremy, an almost vengeful pride.

"We found it first," said Jeremy, suddenly.

“Liar,” said their classmate. “We were climbing around down here after school and Marcus found his shoe sticking out of the bush.”

“He used to be in that drain,” said Kyle, feeling the ferocity as well. This was their discovery, and it had been compromised.

“You’re such a liar, Kyle,” said someone.

Kyle reached into his jacket and produced the toy pistol. He had carried it with him since they first found the body.

“He was holding this,” Kyle said.

“Give it to me,” their classmate said.

Kyle shook his head.

“I said give it, I wanna see it.”

Kyle put it back in his jacket. His classmate charged him, knocking him into the shallow water and landing blows to his face and chest. Kyle struck back, the crowd around them screaming. He stood up and shoved his classmate against the other side of the ravine, knocking him to the ground next to Charles’ body. His foot grazed the body’s side, and the desecration enraged Kyle further. He leapt out with a kick to his classmate’s shins.

The fight lasted for what felt like hours. The screaming of the children did not stop until a voice shattered the commotion.

“What are you doing down there?”

They all looked up simultaneously. Two police officers stood at the edge of the ravine.

“Break it up,” said the other cop.

The crowd shifted toward the body simultaneously, like a school of fish, attempting to hide it from the officers’ line of sight.

“What’s down there?” asked one cop. The other began to descend the incline.

“Move out of the way,” he said.

The children reluctantly parted.

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Within minutes, police swarmed the area. All the children, the ones who didn’t immediately run away, sat above the ravine staring at the clamor below, awaiting questioning. The presence of authority lent reality to the situation, and the acceptance that the body they had found was, in fact, real, came to all of them. Some of them cried.

The boy’s body was covered by a tarp, awaiting the coroner’s arrival. Photographs of the scene were taken, and cops scoured the brush for evidence. They wouldn’t find any.

One officer approached the group.

Another child burst into tears.

“Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

The group remained silent for a moment. Kyle suddenly spoke.

“I’d never seen anything like it before,” he said.

The officer shook his head.

The fear of punishment was beyond them.

Eventually, Charles’ body was pulled from the ravine and loaded onto a stretcher. Parents came and picked some of the children up. Jeremy was carted away by his supremely angry father, leaving Kyle alone, watching.

“Go home,” a cop said to him, eventually.

He remained for a moment longer, his eyes glued to the bush where Charles had been hidden for the past two days. He hadn’t told them that he and Jeremy discovered the body days earlier. For all intents and purposes, the two of them had stumbled upon the body at the same time as everyone else.

He watched as the ambulance drove away with its lights off. He started on his path home.



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